

In Search of National Unity or International Separation WWII ERA TEXTBOOK NARRATIVES IN POST-SOVIET STATES

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 203

June 2012

Ivan Kurilla

Volgograd State University

Some of the most emotionally-charged discussions in the post-Soviet space have not been about economics or foreign policy but controversial historical problems. History debates juxtapose countries like Poland and Ukraine as much as they do countries like Estonia and Russia. But in general, Russia has more problems with its neighbors than other post-Soviet states. This is in part because it inherited a long history of imperial and Soviet policies toward its neighbors, and in part because newly independent states found it overly tempting to build identities in opposition to their former patron. The Russian version of the national historical narrative has changed far less since the Soviet era than the versions taught in other post-Soviet republics.

For many states in Eastern Europe, the most controversial period is World War II. Nations found themselves divided between hostile camps, and many experienced war crimes both as victims and perpetrators. This era invokes painful memories and coming to terms with it is a considerable challenge. This is an endeavor clearly seen in middle and high school education. What narratives do different textbooks have? Specifically, how do educators address various historical social choices and the cleavages that occurred when inhabitants took different roles and sides during World War II? How textbooks portray divisions within nations during the war can indicate the broader tasks historiography is playing in societies, as well as the limits to historical reassessment. This memo explores these issues by taking brief looks at prevalent textbooks used in Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Estonia, and Russia.

Armenia

Considered to be one of the closest allies of Russia, Armenia has not dabbled in the “two equal totalitarianisms” narrative since embraced by many German-occupied countries. A textbook by A. E. Khachikyan (2009) devotes a chapter to the Armenian participation in the war (often called the Great Patriotic War in the post-Soviet space). Not deviating

from Soviet narratives, the chapter tells the story of the republic's efforts to help the Soviet Army, details its economic and human input into the "common victory," and lists Armenians awarded "Hero of the Soviet Union." Another chapter provides information about Armenian diaspora activities during the war. It describes how some Armenians fought against the Nazis with the French Resistance, while others formed an Armenian legion under German command. It mentions how Dro and Nzhdeh – Armenian heroes of the 1918-1920 period who received high praise on previous pages of the textbook – allied themselves with Hitler. The book interprets their actions as an effort to secure German patronage against the Turkish threat in the probable case of Soviet defeat.

Georgia

A Georgian textbook written by Valery Silogava and Kakha Shengelia (2007) is reminiscent of the Armenian narrative about World War II. The authors describe the economic and human input of Soviet Georgia into the military effort and lists Georgian heroes. In the very same chapter, unlike the Armenian textbook, Georgian military units are mentioned as having served with the German army (the Tamar I, Tamar II, Bergman, and Georgian battalions are mentioned). The authors explain that these fighters were motivated by "a great desire to liberate their motherland from the Soviets."

Ukraine

A Ukrainian textbook by Viktor Misan (1997) tells the story of the Great Patriotic War with deeper emotions. Misan describes the extermination of whole villages in Ukraine by Nazi invaders, as well as Babi Yar and other Holocaust sites. After mentioning the widespread partisan movement in Ukraine during the war, the textbook describes the creation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and that it fought against both Nazi Germany and the Communists, though it does not mention that the group also fought against Poles and Czechoslovaks.

Another Ukrainian textbook by V. Vlasov and O. Danilevska (2005) was published during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko. The first paragraph of the chapter about World War II states that the reason for the war stemmed from decisions made by the "leaders of Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Soviet Union – Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin, each of them aspiring to rule the world." Still, the authors use both names for the war – World War II and the Great Patriotic War – on the pages of the textbook. In the description of the guerilla movement, the book mentions pro-Soviet partisan leaders Sydir Kovpak and Alexei Fyodorov, but then the authors proceed to indicate that it was the Ukrainian Insurgent Army that fought against both the Nazis and the Soviets, and that it received the support of the population. Then, on the same page where the Insurgent Army's members are praised, the textbook tells the story of Soviet General Nikolay Vatutin who led the liberation of Kyiv in 1943. What is missing is the fact that Vatutin was assassinated by an Insurgent Army ambush attack in 1944.

Estonia

The Estonian textbook by A. Adamson and S. Valdmaa (2000) devotes much attention to World War II. The major idea of the chapters devoted to this tragic period revolves around the impossibility for Estonia to make a correct choice in 1939 between two coercive powers. The authors criticize the pre-war government of Estonia and then proceed to tell the story of Estonians fighting on both sides of the war. There were Estonian military units in the Soviet, German, and even Finnish armies. Because of these divisions, World War II forced Estonians to fight against each other. Such a description changes the perception of the war in the textbook to an almost *imposed* Estonian civil war, positioning Estonia as a victim of the two powers. The Estonian Waffen-SS Legion is described the same way as the Soviet Estonian Infantry Corps. The authors tried to keep the narrative balanced, describing the two great powers as equally hostile to Estonian independence. They also occasionally use the ethnic term “Russians” instead of “Soviets” when describing the enemies of Estonia’s “Finnish guys” (Estonians serving in the Finnish army).

One of the authors of the Estonian textbook, A. Adamson, recently (2009) stressed the idea that Estonian history should be less ethnic and move toward a more multicultural “European” view. He also lamented that the Russian minority in Estonia belongs to the Russian “information field,” thus preventing its integration with the new Estonian identity.

In fact, his own textbook provides an example of the problem he highlights – the unity it establishes for the Estonian nation does not include the Russian and German populations of the country, and the historical narrative provided by the book shows Russians only as an alien force and not part of the common nation.

Russia

Unlike the textbooks of the countries discussed above, Russian textbooks are not eager to adopt an exculpatory attitude toward Soviet citizens who fought within German ranks in World War II (if sometimes the attitude may be considered benign). In them, the unity of the Russian nation excludes those who stood against the Soviets in the war.

A textbook by N. Zagladin, S. Kozlenko, S. Minakov, and Y. Petrov (2004) does not use the word “traitors” to describe controversial figures such as Andrey Vlasov (a Red Army general who collaborated with Nazi Germany in an attempt to overthrow Stalin’s regime), Pyotr Krasnov (an anti-communist White army general), or Andrei Shkuro (an anti-Bolshevik Cossack leader). It even refers to Stalin’s Order No. 270 that implied that all Soviet prisoners of war were traitors, which essentially forced enlisted Russian men to fight to the death, as a partial reason for the *Vlasovites’* collaboration with Germany. However, the work does not give any assessment of that part of the Soviet population that fought and worked with the Germans.

A textbook by V. Izmozik and S. Rudnik (2009) devotes more space to a discussion on collaborationism. The authors give estimates of the number of Soviet citizens who fought on the German side – several hundred to a million, and provides possible reasons for their decisions – hatred of Soviet power; hope to revive a Russian

nation-state; fear for one's life; attempt to deceive the enemy and flee. The book also discusses the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, referring to its "formal" efforts to maintain an equal distance from both the USSR and Germany. But the authors stress that the Ukrainian nationalists participated in the extermination of Jewish and Polish populations, and the book insists that the "majority of the population rejected collaboration with the invaders, deeming such behavior a grave crime."

A textbook written by A. Danilov, K. Kosulina, and M. Brandt (2010) mentions the Germans' attempts to control and use the national movements in Ukraine, Crimea, Western Belarus, the Baltic states, and the mountainous areas of Chechen-Ingushetia in their war against the USSR. Regarding the *Vlasovites*, the authors write that Vlasov "tried to explain his betrayal by an ideological aim – his fight against Stalin's regime," concluding that the Germans failed "to shake the friendship among the peoples of the USSR." Unlike most other countries' textbooks on this theme, this Russian one continues to emphasize the "friendship of the peoples" and shows no mercy for "traitors."

The textbook by Igor Dolutskii (2002) permits no hesitation, directly calling Vlasov and his associates traitors: "they betrayed not Stalin but the Motherland." This book was later excluded from the list of recommended textbooks by the Russian Ministry of Education and Science after it received severe criticism from the Russian authorities. It is noteworthy that the last chapter of the book discusses the Vladimir Putin "era" and it contains quotes by Yuri Burtin ("an authoritarian dictatorship") and Grigorii Yavlinskii ("a police state").¹

The only book that tries to promote an alternative narrative, including a sympathetic mention of Russian collaborationists, was never recommended for schools and was not in fact a textbook. This is the two-volume Russian History in the 20th Century edited by Andrei Zubov and published in 2009.

Conclusion

As we can see, the historical narratives that appeared during the post-Soviet period caused a great split between former "brother republics." The main goal of those narratives was the creation of myths to unify each of the new nations. The nations' internal divisions during World War II prevented them from writing histories based on a one-sided perspective. The Baltic and Central European views that they were "victim nations of two totalitarianisms" play a vitally important role in unifying them domestically and helping them find peace with their pasts. The problem that appears in Estonia is that the new *unifying* narrative does unify pro-German and pro-Soviet Estonians but does not integrate Estonian Russians.

Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia provide another approach to the war: their textbooks are written with the clear message that there *was* a right side in World War II but that collaboration with the Nazis by some national figures can be justified.

¹ Of note here, attempts by the Don Cossacks to rehabilitate *ataman* Pyotr Krasnov, who fought for the Germans, were obstructed by Putin.

Russia, on the contrary, is less ready than other nations to see World War II as a civil conflict and its narratives provide no option for the integration of Russian collaborationists into the country's history. Such attempts have taken place, but not at the school textbook level.

It is clear that differences in historical "optics" make it very unlikely that incongruent versions of World War II will merge in the near future. This also means that well-meaning projects to establish "jointly written history textbooks" cannot be successful for now. It is nearly impossible to marry two national narratives, each aiming to unify one nation.

It is thus advisable not to politicize differences in historical understanding. The abolition in February 2012 of the infamous Russian presidential commission to "Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests" provides the possibility of a needed end to an era when internal identity problems exercised a huge influence on the international relations of the region. Historians in Central and East Europe should continue working to find common ground when dealing with identity questions, political pressures, and professional responsibilities.

For the references and citations of, and page numbers from, the textbooks involved in this analysis please contact the author.